



To mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz later this month, one of the last remaining survivors, Edith Grosman, met the grandson of the camp's monstrous commandant, Rudolf Höss. Could they be reconciled? Report by *Simon Worrall*



WE MUST NEVER FORGET



THE HORROR

Above: lines of men, women and children prisoners at the Nazi death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau

Left: Rudolf Höss, who boasted the camp could “get rid” of 10,000 people in 24 hours. More than 1m died at Auschwitz

Right: Edith Grosman with Rudolf’s grandson Rainer Höss, who campaigns against far-right extremism



They say that the eyes are the window of the soul, but in the case of Rainer Höss it is his prominent jug ears that register the emotional currents swirling inside him. As Edith Grosman, a 95-year-old survivor of Auschwitz, leans forward on the sofa and delivers a passionate tirade against Germany and the Germans, those ears turn scarlet.

“What is this nation [Germany]?” she demands. “Cruel, stupid, mentally weak?” She points an accusing finger. “The Germany of Goethe and Beethoven! How could this nation do what they did?”

We are sitting in the living room of Edith’s apartment in north Toronto. A tiny, birdlike creature, with cropped, chestnut-coloured hair, she sits with her left leg stretched out in front of her, unable to bend it as a result of the bone tuberculosis that she caught at the death camp. The faded tattoo ink of her number, #1970, is just visible below the rolled-up sleeve of her blue-and-white striped T-shirt. Her eyesight is fading, she cannot walk without a cane, but the fierce energy that enabled her to survive some three-and-a-half years in Auschwitz still shines out of her. The day before our interview, at her great-grandson’s bar mitzvah, she sat in the front row, the star of the show, singing and reciting the Torah with more gusto than the rest of the congregation put together.

“You see, even you speak like this!” she cries, incandescent with anger when her house guest suggests that Hitler hated the Jews because they were rich. I explain that Rainer is only volunteering an opinion about Hitler’s racist prejudices, but her indignation does not subside. “How can an intelligent person like you say that the Jews were rich? Have you been in east Slovakia among the poor Jews, who had to collect food outside to feed their families?”

This is the first time she has sat in a room with a German since Auschwitz. And this is no ordinary German, but the grandson of the very man who tried to extinguish her life, the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolph Höss. She has clearly been waiting her whole life to get these feelings off her chest. “To kill millions of people like this!” she cries in her heavily accented English, which even after more than three decades in Canada has retained its Slovak roots. “This was the biggest sin that was done in human existence!”

Throughout this onslaught, Rainer sits upright on the sofa, with a startled look on his face, kneading his delicate, white hands together. The only time he challenges Edith is when she suggests that even today most Germans are anti-semitic. “I think that’s too harsh,” he says, calmly. Edith is not the first survivor he has met. As part of his journey of reconciliation, which has led him to devote his life to speaking out against his infamous ancestor and today’s right-wing



Edith Grosman holds a photograph from 1936 of her sister, Lea (second right), and friends, many of whom did not survive

politics, he has sat down with 166 others. He was even informally “adopted” as a grandson by Eva Mozes Kor, a victim with her twin sister of Josef Mengele — Auschwitz’s Angel of Death — and his infamous medical experiments. But Rainer has never before faced a barrage like this.

“When I went [back] to Auschwitz after the war, the mayor of Auschwitz gave a speech and said, ‘Under this concrete are the ashes of 100,000 girls.’ I started crying so hard I got a cramp,” Edith says.

Can you ever forgive the Germans, I ask. Is reconciliation possible?

“I can never forgive!” she exclaims. “What does it mean, reconciliation? I like words, I am a big reader, but I don’t feel this word.” She touches her breast. “Here, in my heart.”

Edith, born Friedmann, was 17 when she and her sister, Lea, and nearly 1,000 other young women and girls were rounded up in Slovakia and deported to Poland. They were told they would be serving their country by working in a factory. As the train began to climb the Tatra mountains, they proudly sang the Slovakian national anthem.

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Though their story has been overlooked by historians of the Holocaust, these 999 girls and young women were the very first victims of what would become known as the Final Solution. Most succumbed, physically or psychologically to the horrors they had to endure. One of Edith’s first memories is of standing naked in the courtyard at Auschwitz for roll call, watching the blood of girls, who had effectively been raped during their genealogical examination, stain the snow red. Later, she had to watch as her beloved sister, Lea, was murdered — one of the victims in the first mass execution of 10,000 young women at Auschwitz-Birkenau on December 5, 1942. Edith has suffered terrible pangs of survivor’s guilt ever since.

Today, she is one of only a handful of survivors from the first official Jewish transport to Auschwitz. When I asked her, some weeks earlier, if she would be willing to meet Rainer, she readily agreed. “I am not afraid to meet him,” she said, without hesitation. “The children are not responsible for the sins of their fathers.”

We did make a rule that, if it became too emotionally demanding for Edith, we’d stop the interview. But as she continued to rail against the Germans, I wondered whether it was Rainer who needed protection.

“I saw your grandfather a few times,” Edith recalls. “I found a big package of diamonds, after a Belgium transport came in. I was working in ‘Canada’ — the detail in the camp responsible for sorting through the clothes of arriving prisoners].” She looks across at Rainer. “We were packing the coats to send to Germany and I had in my hand a coat that was so pulling me. I packed it away, then I took it out again. I said to myself: why are you playing with it?”

Then, all of a sudden a packet of diamonds fell out!” She pauses for effect. “I had on an apron and so I put the packet of diamonds in the pocket.

“That was Saturday. On Sunday this Jewish boy came to me. ‘This is the last day you live,’ he said. ‘The Germans found the diamonds in your pocket.’” She takes a deep breath. “On Monday, when we went back to work, Ambros, the SS man, led us outside, a whole bunch of girls, and began to call our names to search us. Everyone had something!” She roars with laughter.

“Then Höss arrived in his elegant clothes on his motorcycle.” Edith waves her hand as she imitates the guttural sound of his shouting. “He’s furious because we are not working but standing around outside. So he went inside to see Ambros, but Ambros didn’t tell him about the diamonds. So Höss came out and drove away. ‘I said, ‘Girls, we are saved!’ Ambros has taken all the diamonds!’ And a few days later he left the camp.” She chuckles. “Thank God they were also cheating each other!”

Rainer listens with a rapt expression on his face. And as Edith falls silent, he has only one word. “Wow!” he exclaims. “Wow!”

A mild-mannered, devout Catholic, who famously described himself as “entirely normal”, Rudolf Höss was responsible for the murder of more than 1m people, most of them Jews. In *Commandant of Auschwitz*, the autobiography that the Polish authorities forced him to write before he was executed in 1947, he states with the matter-of-factness of a production manager at a car factory that, at its peak, the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp could “get rid of 10,000 people in 24 hours”. Höss himself would stand at the window of the gas chambers, watching his victims die. An SS report from 1944 praised his efficiency, calling him “a true pioneer”.

I ask Rainer if he feels guilty about his grandfather’s crimes. “Not guilty, because I didn’t do anything,” he replies. “But ashamed.”

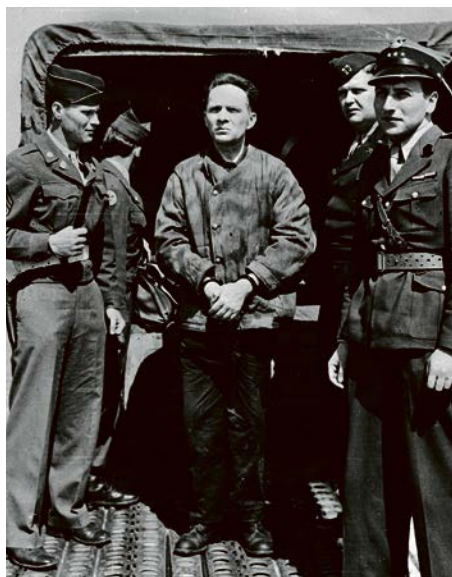
Now 54, with brown hair highlighted by a wisp of white at the front, Rainer is warm and personable. Not at all the tortured soul I had expected. But under his elegantly cut tweed jacket, tattooed into his flesh, are the numbers of some of the prisoners his grandfather murdered. “I found out about my grandfather step by step,” he recalls. “When I was in boarding school I had a problem, stealing food. And as punishment, they made me work in the gardens. The gardener had worked for my grandfather in Auschwitz; and when he heard the name Höss, he beat me up. He did exactly to me what my grandfather did to him. It was revenge. But I didn’t know who I was yet.”

His grandfather’s true identity was a taboo subject in the Höss family, which glorified him as a patriot and soldier. On a



Rainer Höss grew up unaware of his family’s dark history — he discovered the truth for himself at 15, and left home soon after

“I met my grandfather’s barber in 2010 and he said, ‘You look exactly like him.’ That was a horror. You say, ‘Oh God, is the same evil in me?’”



Rudolf Höss at the airport in Nuremberg, during the military tribunals in 1946. He was sentenced to death and executed in 1947

school trip to Dachau, Rainer saw photos of Rudolf Höss, who was described as a mass murderer. “I called my father,” Rainer recalls. “But he said, ‘No, it’s a spelling mistake. It should be Rudolf Hess [the deputy fuhrer to Hitler, who flew solo to Scotland in an attempt to negotiate peace in 1941 and was taken prisoner].’ So for me it was clear: trust your father.”

Rainer’s was a brutal, Prussian-style upbringing. “The only way [my father] communicated was with his leather belt,” he says, grimly. “And that’s something I always found so confusing. Because [I have been told] my grandfather was not like that. I have met many people who knew him and they all said how much he loved his kids.”

That didn’t stop Rudolf Höss murdering tens of thousands of Jewish children. At first, the commandant admitted, he felt “weak-kneed” at having to push screaming children inside the chambers, but after Adolf Eichmann [one of the chief architects of the Final Solution] explained to him the necessity of killing children to prevent a “new biological cell for the reemerging of this people”, his mind was “at rest”. After a day’s work of extermination he would return to the villa nearby where he lived with his family — his wife called it her “paradise”. He spent the evening listening to classical music and writing poetry about the beauty of Auschwitz.

“She was really cruel,” Rainer says of his grandmother. “I spoke to my grandfather’s barber at Auschwitz, who told me that she was far crueller than he was. She was the real commandant behind him.”

Rainer finally learnt the full story of his grandfather when he discovered two books on the family bookshelves: *People in Auschwitz* by Hermann Langbein and *Commandant of Auschwitz*, his grandfather’s memoir. “My father came out of his office,” he recalls. “He hit me, then took the books away and shut them in his office. So I went down to my mother in the kitchen and asked, ‘What’s going on?’ She said, ‘When your father is away on a business trip, I will give you the books.’”

After reading them, Rainer packed his bags and left his family home, never to return. He was 15. There followed a confused period of drink and drug problems. Then an attempt to take his own life. “So many things came together in that moment. It was just too much.”

His mother also tried to take her own life several times. “We found her hanging on the balcony when I was a small child,” he recalls. “My father was really a brutal guy. He beat her up. I remember one day seeing her hanging out of a window, bleeding, and my father standing there with a machete.”

Rainer credits becoming a father himself at the age of 17 as a “lifesaver”. “That’s when my life started. I realised I had to change myself, not to be like my father was, like the rest of the Höss family was.” ➤➤➤

Rainer had three more children, but by then he had become “obsessed” with researching his grandfather’s story, travelling all over the world while his marriage foundered. “I wanted to find out the truth about who he really was. The Commandant memoir was not the truth for me. He invented things: that he was the youngest major in the First World War, who brought his platoon back as a hero.” He snorts. “But it’s not true. He worked for the German railways in Mannheim, laying railroad tracks.”

One of the people he found was Jozef Paczynski, his grandfather’s barber. “I met him in Krakow in 2010, when we made the documentary film *Hitler’s Children*,” Rainer recalls. “He said, ‘Your shoulders are a little wider and you are a little taller but you look exactly like your grandfather.’” Rainer’s eyes widen. “That was a horror! And for many years that was a huge problem for me. Combine that with my passion for neatness and accuracy, just like my grandfather, and you say, ‘Oh God, is the same evil in me?’”

Did he ever think of changing his name? “That’s a good question.” He tilts back his head and laughs. “But no. I use the name as a weapon.”

That weapon is today aimed at Nazis, far-right politicians and hatemongers of all stripes. “My focus is the young generation,” he explains. “I go into schools and talk about the Holocaust and the crimes the Germans committed.”

In 2014, he also founded an organisation, Footsteps, which supports survivors of the Holocaust and seeks to keep their stories alive. This year, the new 1,600 page biography of his grandfather, the fruit of 30 years’ research, will be published in France. “For me it is about being a voice, not an echo,” he says.

He finds today’s worldwide rise in anti-semitism, xenophobia and populism deeply troubling. “There are Nazis in Russia, in the USA and Britain. Farage’s ideas about migrants is the new version of fascism. Like Pegida, in Germany. Or Marine Le Pen. Or Trump.”

Not surprisingly, he is a target for trolls. “I get attacked a lot by right-wingers and Nazis. They send me emails or letters, saying what a great man my grandfather was and that Zyklon B [poison used in Nazi death camps] never existed, that it’s a lie by the Jews.”

He has also been attacked from unexpected quarters. In 2009, an Israeli journalist, Eldad Beck, who travelled to Auschwitz with Rainer, claimed that he tried to sell Nazi memorabilia inherited from his grandfather to the international Holocaust organisation Yad Vashem. It’s an accusation Rainer firmly denies.

One of the most moving stages of his journey of redemption was his relationship with his mother, who died two years ago.



Under the banner of his Footsteps organisation, Rainer Höss (right) speaks at a Holocaust education event in Toronto, 2019

“We were close at the end,” he says. “We worked together on the situation she was in because it didn’t seem right that just I escaped. It was really painful for her. But at the end, she was a completely different person. She could laugh and enjoy life.”

It was with his mother that Rainer went to Auschwitz for the first time, in 2009, standing at the gallows where his grandfather was hanged. “We planned five or six days, but we left after two. It was just too horrible,” he recalls. “I spent days vomiting and crying. I saw it on my mum’s face, as well. To see the horror itself, knowing every brick there was built by him.”

He has not seen his father since leaving home in 1980, but he believes he is alive and living somewhere in Germany. “The German bureaucracy would have informed me if he had died,” he jokes. “So he must be alive. But I have no desire to see him.”

He has also severed all contact with other members of the Höss family. “I know my brother is in touch with my father. But I will not have anything to do with them. Why should I listen to their lies and glorifications?” His aunt, Rudolf Höss’s sister, lives in a suburb of Washington DC. A cousin, in Australia, is vice-president of Aryan Nations, a white-supremacist group.

Is he in touch with other descendants of prominent Nazis? “I am in contact with

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Niklas Frank, his father was the general governor of occupied Poland,” he says. “I am in touch with Bettina Göring, the grandniece of [Hermann] Göring. I am in contact with Katrin Himmler, the granddaughter of Himmler’s brother, and with Monika Hertwig, the granddaughter of Amon Göth, the commandant in Schindler’s List.”

Have they moved in the same direction? “The only one who has, though not so aggressively as me, is Niklas Frank. Katrin Himmler is active as well, she goes into schools. But others don’t want to talk to me. I’m the black sheep of the Nazi families.” He laughs. “I opened the Pandora’s box.”

Edith Grosman feels no ill will towards Rainer personally. “I don’t have anything against Rainer,” she says, smiling. But she can never forgive what happened at Auschwitz. “They knew when the Jewish holidays were, and chose those days to kill people. My sister, Lea, was sent to the gas on the first Hanukkah after we arrived.”

There are also moments of humour and tenderness between the grandson and the survivor. When Edith imitates the way the Germans were always shouting — “Just like the Jews!” — Rainer doubles up with laughter. Later, Edith’s granddaughter, Naomi, comes and sits next to her *Babi*, as she calls Edith. Her grandmother leans her head on her shoulder and holds her hand.

I ask Naomi how it feels to meet Rainer. “I am named after Edith’s sister, her second name was Naomi,” she says. “And I am only here because *Babi* survived. But I don’t really know how to feel about it. I have German friends from when I was younger, and we never talk about the Holocaust. It’s just part of my family history.”

After the war, Edith married the well known Slovak novelist and screenwriter, Ladislav Grosman, who adapted his book *The Shop on Main Street* for the screen, winning an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1965. Edith keeps the statuette in her airing cupboard, behind a pile of towels.

When I ask her if she has any final words for Rainer, she doesn’t hesitate. “I have one final word to every nation and to every individual,” she says forcefully. “Don’t hate! I am 95 and I have lived through a lot of bad times. But after I came out of the camp, I said that I would make a paradise for myself.” She touches Naomi’s hand. “My paradise is this. And my son and great-grandsons. That is my paradise.” ■

*Edith Grosman writes the afterword to *The Nine Hundred: The Extraordinary Young Women of the First Official Jewish Transport to Auschwitz* by Heather Dune Macadam, published on Thursday (Hodder and Stoughton £9.99)*